

CSREES Portfolio Review Expert Panel Report

Portfolio 2.2 CY 2000 – 2004

REPORT

External Review Completed: February 2006

Portfolio Overview

In Portfolio 2.2, CSREES engages through unique partnerships with agencies, states, institutions, the land-grant system, and the private sector, in improving the quality of life and well-being of rural American people in the areas of health, safety, biosecurity, resource management, technology and sociology, human development and family well-being, families and youth at risk, 4-H youth development, housing and indoor environments, and community planning and development.

Portfolio 2.2 is comprised of the following knowledge areas (KAs):

KA 607:	Consumer Economics
KA 721:	Insects and Other Pests Affecting Humans
KA 722:	Zoonotic Diseases and Parasites Affecting Humans
KA 801:	Individual and Family Resource Management
KA 802:	Human Development and Family Well-Being
KA 803:	Sociological and Technological Change Affecting Individuals, Families, and Communities
KA 804:	Human Environmental Issues Concerning Apparel, Textiles, and Residential and Commercial Structures
KA 805:	Community Institutions, Health, and Social Services
KA 806:	4-H Youth Development (New Knowledge Area)
KA 813:	Adult Aging and Development (Proposed Knowledge Area)

Introductory Remarks

The panel praises CSREES for using the Program Accountability Rating Tool (PART) mandated by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as a planning vehicle. CSREES has thought deeply about its varied programs and made positive changes. The panel was impressed with the CSREES staff's dedication, ability to accomplish a great deal with limited resources, and desire to receive honest, if at times critical, feedback. Note: The panel used CSREES to refer to the Federal office in DC and Federal/Land-Grant system to refer to the entire network encompassing as well the partnerships with state programs funded in part or full through CSREES.

Relevance

The panel operationally defined relevance as *the ability of the CSREES Federal/Land-Grant system to make good investments and to focus on real and critical issues.*

Scope (discussed by panel as relating to "breadth")

The panel concluded that the portfolio demonstrated exceptional coverage. The panel members believe this breadth was possible because of the hard work of the Federal/Land-Grant systems as they engaged with a variety of other entities to deliver programs. The panel was particularly impressed with the creative leveraging of funds and other resources by the Deputies and the NPLs. However, this breadth was also seen as a weakness: The panel was concerned that resources may be spread too thin to accomplish significant, long-term outcomes in the highest priority areas.

Focus (discussed by panel as relating to “depth”)

The panel operationally defined ‘focus’ as “the ability of the 2.2 Portfolio to remain focused on issues, topics, and critical needs of the nation” using the language found in the Criteria and Dimensions section of the self-review document. Based on this definition, the panel felt linkages to issues that are of critical needs to the nation, and appropriate to Portfolio 2.2, were moderately focused. The panel was not convinced the portfolio prioritized the highest, most critical needs of the nation to address *Quality of Life in Rural America*. The panel attributed this to a lack of a targeted strategic plan for the portfolio. Because budget can be a good proxy for inferring an agency’s priorities, CSREES should articulate the relationship between funding levels and priorities for possible realignment. The panel recognizes that there are constraints but encourages CSREES to provide greater leadership in focusing resources on programs that will be identified as top priorities in the strategic planning process.

Emerging Issues

Although the portfolio identified many contemporary and/or emerging issues, the documentation of these issues, was inadequate. There does not appear to be a clear-cut, systematic method to use to sort out and identify the most critical issues. The detailed articulation provided by the states on critical issues is largely missing from the self-review document, the presentations by NPLs, and the other evidentiary materials. Communication between the NPLs and states can be improved.

Integration

The panel scored CSREES as moderately integrated. Legislative criteria requiring integration are helping CSREES deal with this issue (e.g., AREERA requires that 25% of the resources be spent on integrated projects). The panel suggests NPLs take initiative to integrate their work beyond what is required. The panel recognizes that education and teaching activities were discussed in Portfolio 2.1 but stresses that they need to be included or referenced in this review as well.

Multidisciplinary Balance

The panel noted that while some multidisciplinary examples were provided, the self-review document did not do an adequate job of illustrating what the panel believes to be the breadth of true multidisciplinary projects. But considering their own knowledge of multidisciplinary projects supported by CSREES, the panel rated the work of Federal/Land-Grant system as highly balanced.

Quality

The panel operationally defined quality as whether the *portfolio focused on the “right things” and contributed to significant outcomes (in contrast to outputs.)*

Significance

The panel was disappointed with the evidence provided in the Portfolio 2.2 self-review document. The lack of a good reporting system, a well structured database, and the fact that states are not consistent in reporting may all contribute to these evidentiary issues. Federal/Land-Grant system needs to move from counting outputs to developing and using outcomes measures.

CSREES must exert leadership and define a minimum level of rigor to be used in data analysis and reporting. Federal/Land-Grant system needs to make a concerted effort to collect better data and to make better use of reported data. New efforts such as *Plan of Work* and *OneSolution* are expected to improve the documentation of significant findings.

Stakeholder Input

Although the panel scored the portfolio as having many stakeholder/constituent inputs based on their own knowledge, these were not adequately represented in the self-review document. States use many avenues to provide stakeholder input, such as “town hall” meetings, surveys, etc. Communication with stakeholders, beginning at the community level, is critical. Establishing and increasing two-way channels of communication would improve efforts in this portfolio.

Portfolio Alignment

The panel found much of the portfolio to be well aligned with the current state of science. The data reported between 2000 and 2004 were significant. CSREES should make funding a high-quality evaluation system a priority. NPLs must lead to promote consistent system-wide evaluation. Federal/Land-Grant system needs to work together to disseminate the findings of evaluations so that the portfolio can continue to be well aligned with the current state of science. Ineffectual or lesser priority programs can be reduced or eliminated.

Appropriate Methodology

The panel believed that the portfolio demonstrated that Federal/Land-Grant system usually applied appropriate/cutting edge methodology. Panel members recognized the peer-review process for research proposals assures current methodologies are being used.

Performance

The panel operationally defined performance as whether or not CSREES staff did a good job and whether or not the portfolio was comprehensive.

Portfolio Productivity

While the panel recognized NPLs are all extraordinarily busy, engaged in many activities and are quite productive, they did not believe this productivity was demonstrated through the self-review document. Because the reporting system is unsystematic and incomplete, the portfolio could not be rated as fully successful. Reporting extension productivity is currently problematic because the system does not fully account for it. Additionally, formula funds help support the infrastructure. This support affords the states the ability to conduct relevant programs and activities, but the impact is under-rated when the CRIS system primarily reports research projects. The new State Plan of Work system is expected to improve ability to demonstrate productivity.

Portfolio Comprehensiveness

The panel operationally defined comprehensiveness as reflective of both depth and breadth. While work under this portfolio was broad, the panel questioned whether the portfolio actually contributed to enhancing rural life along the most critical dimensions. The consensus of the panel was that the portfolio was moderately comprehensive (quite broad yet not deep enough). This judgment of comprehensiveness was done within the context of current levels of funding. The portfolio needs increased funding, more and better strategic planning and thinking (tied to thoughtful outcome measures), and greater focus on critical issues. CSREES should focus on doing a few things very well rather than many things satisfactorily.

Portfolio Timeliness

Given the limited information provided, the panelists applied their own knowledge about funding and timeliness in the states and arrived at a consensus that *some* projects achieve closure on time.

Agency Guidance

Both management and leadership are listed in the scoring criteria, but *management* and *leadership* are two very different functions. CSREES has been able to amass a shared portfolio of accomplishment only through aggressive partnering with state networks, other agencies and foundations. CSREES is urged to provide leadership within the context of distributed responsibility to ensure priorities are set and emerging issues addressed. The panel evaluated *management* as satisfactory and *leadership* as somewhat weak. The consensus for the dimension as a whole was that CSREES performed satisfactorily.

Portfolio Accountability

Given the current funding and goal-setting structures, the panel regarded *accountability* as actually dispersed; yet, the partnership system itself puts the onus on CSREES. The system does not capture variations in accountability among the states or allocate accountability between CSREES and the state partners. It also says nothing of all the other funding partners. For these reasons the panel scored the portfolio as having a moderate level of accountability.

Portfolio 2.2 Score – 81 out of 100 possible.

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